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The Lowell Skinners

The disturbing phenomenon of the Korean war prisoners who stayed behind in China has surfaced again in the curious and lackluster person of Lowell Skinner. To judge by his television appearance on Sunday, he is no more certain of the reasons why he has come home than of the reasons why he declined repatriation a decade ago.

His status as a celebrity (a curio), his ambiguous role as a vessel of American values, his part in the overwhelming drama of the cold war: All these seemed distasteful if not incomprehensible to him. He shied from judgments—of the Chinese, of his critics, of himself—and appeared resigned to any handicaps or opprobrium that may now befall him. All he wants is a job. This was Lowell Skinner, too small a man for the scale of his own life, a moral and political neuter.

More interesting than this man and his few fellows is the American reaction to them, in particular the national soul-searching which they still occasion and the apprehension that they represent a part of America that somehow is weak and wanting. This apprehension underlays the suggestion by Allen Dulles and Senator Keating, who appeared on the same television program, for more instruction in communism. They felt, it was clear, that something should be done.

We wonder if the 21 "voluntary nonrepatriates"—the bureaucracy's mind-dulling phrase—would have acted any differently if they had received a course in communism. Were they perhaps not too deeply set in their own unfortunate ways to respond to lectures about the "enemy?" For them, was not the battered stuff of their own pre-prisoner lives the real enemy? The country need not feel disgraced by these men. They are not national symbols but individuals of ill fortune.